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**Colin Manlove**

Contents: **W. B. Yeats:** “Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places”; **Gary Lachman:** “The Spiritual Detective: How Baudelaire Invented Symbolism, by way of Swedenborg, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe”; **Adelheid Kegler:** “Elements of Swedenborgian Thought in Symbolist Landscapes: With Reference to Sheridan Le Fanu and George MacDonald”; **Richard Lines:** “Eros and the Unknown Victorian: Coventry Patmore and Swedenborg”; **Gary Lachman:** “Space: The Final Frontier. O.V. de Lubicz Milosz and Swedenborg”; **Arthur Conan Doyle:** “The Story of Swedenborg.”

**T**he writings of the eighteenth-century writer Emmanuel Swedenborg, scientist and visionary, became popular in the nineteenth century through the Symbolists and Victorian Spiritualism. Swedenborg’s influence is seen in the work of such poets as the Brownings and Coventry Patmore, and in the paintings of G. F. Watts and his circle, where a sense is found of a deeper spiritual reality looking through this one to which we belong and are bound. Swedenborg particularly appealed to the Victorians for his sense of continuity, his portrayal of the next life as a further exploration of our relationships in this world: wives and husbands, parents and children, lovers, comrades, all would meet again. There would be no sharp division between this world and the next, nor should those made dear to us in this world be lost. The domestic emphasis of Victorian culture also furthered Swedenborg’s attraction, as did its emphasis on personal relationships, illustrated in the huge vogue of the novel. Swedenborg’s work also appealed for its sober certainty and its exact recording of matters beyond death, for here in action was a spiritual scientist who could give renewed strength to faith against the scientists of godless evolutionism.

The volume under review is one of a series of explorations of Swedenborg’s thought and its influence, some by modern members of the New Church established in his name. Of its six essays four are original, and the first and last well known. All four of the new essays consider Swedenborg’s influence on Symbolist and other European writers of the period 1840-1930. The piece by

Adelheld Klinger, concerning the influence of Swedenborg on George MacDonald, will be our main concern here.

Kegler's essay, more a series of observations than a connected argument, illustrates the workings of several images from nineteenth-century writers influenced by Swedenborg. Swedenborg's concept of the world and of imagery is teleological: everything seen signifies and partakes in a deeper reality beyond it. We see the object before us within time, but it takes insight to perceive that object's concurrent life in eternity. Kegler explores the notion of the "inner eye" in the work of one of Swedenborg's literary disciples, J. Sheridan Le Fanu, author of such terrifying stories as "Green Tea" (1869) and "Mr Justice Harbottle" (1872), showing how the Judge in the latter story has a recurrent vision of himself being hung which is a picture of the landscape of his soul as he glimpses it in this world and as he will live in it in the next.

It seems to this writer, however, that this image of judgement, so frequent in Le Fanu, is precisely where he differs from Swedenborg. In Swedenborg's Hell no less than his Heaven, the inhabitants would be happy, because they lived in the landscape most congenial to them. Fire and brimstone would be as much their element as a beautiful world was to the good. (This did not mean for Swedenborg that there were no final moral distinctions.) But Le Fanu is much more punitive. The judge is going to suffer for what he has done, the minister is going to be driven mad by the little demon that haunts his hypocrisies. Kegler says that symbolic images can express the spiritual landscape not only of an individual, but of his/her age: here we see the picture of the judge's soul as also that of the punitive nineteenth century. Kegler too readily identifies Swedenborg's ideas with those of the writers she considers.

It is also a matter of distance in relation to the image. How do we experience it? Do we look at it and understand, as with the judge or the minister in Le Fanu? Or are we drawn into it to feel more directly the transcendent in the real? Kegler does not consider this, for she moves from her account of Le Fanu to a painting by G. F. Watts, "The Dweller in the Innermost" (1885-86), before which the observer can only understand the symbolism by living through it:

The painting's message, despite its intensive presence, remains unclear: the tension between the visible and the invisible is driven to a dialectical climax suggesting a "mystical content."

Like Le Fanu's story, understanding can only be grasped by means of an "inner sense." And here too, access is given by way of Swedenborgian concepts.

The "inner sense" here is more a sensation than a perception or revelation as in

the Le Fanu image, and one is left to wonder just how the workings of the inner sense are conducted. This is only further complicated by the following statement that access is also given here by “concepts,” which suggests a much more rational approach. And to say that such access is given by Swedenborgian concepts suggests that an understanding of Swedenborg is a prerequisite for experiencing such symbols aright.

Part of the reason for this is that Kegler knows that on one’s ignorant own, one might read a symbol in many false directions as much as the true one, and that guidance and training are needed to direct us to the appropriate response. She views the modern, post-Romantic world as a labyrinth in which we are all too easily lost. Earlier, more religious civilisations, habituated to a symbolic reading of the world, would not have had this difficulty. But if this is true, and modern Symbolism is indebted to Swedenborg, then surely, knowing their images would misread by their benighted modern readers, these Symbolists would have directed them to read Swedenborg first.

A major issue here is the distinction between Symbolism, in which certain images contain the divine, and what we more commonly know as symbolism, where images may express a mind without any divine reference. (The more exact mind of a C.S. Lewis would call it the difference between symbol and metaphor.) For instance the images of the house in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), or of the rotting garden in Tennyson’s “Mariana” (1830) express minds tipping into madness, but nothing more numinous. That Kegler does not make this distinction makes her analysis at times rather blurred.

Our primary concern here is with Kegler’s (occasional) treatment of Swedenborg’s influence on George MacDonald. Very usefully she treats MacDonald’s novels and fantasies alike here, for whatever worlds they present, one is no less potentially endowed with symbols than another. We hear then much of *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, on which Kegler has written previously. She claims that the child Wilfrid is MacDonald’s picture of Swedenborg’s “Grand Man,” the “divine life manifested in human form and with it the origin and source of the whole universe” (52), and even if we might find it rather hard to accept this with the rather sickly Wilfrid, Kegler has put her finger on a very strong element throughout MacDonald’s work, namely, the divine and apocalyptic glory of the child.

Kegler returns to MacDonald at the end of her essay, after having considered Symbolist landscapes in Le Fanu and in the Russian poet Vladimir Solov’ev. Here she deals with a landscape from MacDonald’s *Lilith*. This is the first vision Mr. Vane has through the mirror in his attic of the Region of the Seven

Dimensions he is soon to enter:

I saw before me a wild country, broken and heathy. Desolate hills of no great height, but somehow of strange appearance, occupied the middle distance; along the horizon stretched the tops of a far-off mountain-range; nearest me lay a tract of moorland, flat and melancholy.

Kegler calls this “a soul’s view of the material world before it descends, enters and becomes involved in it” (59). How then does it come over as a Symbolist and Swedenborgian image? It is certainly an odd one. For a start it is banal, where we might expect something wonderful or exotic with a new world: it could easily have been the landscape around Mr Vane’s house. Kegler notes that the language used is curiously flat, colourless and neutral, and one must agree, despite the words “desolate” and “melancholy.” She observes how the syntax mirrors the sense. It seems that flatness is the idiom: the exciting-seeming “wild country” becomes “broken and rocky”; there are hills, but they are “of no great height,” and the moorland “lay... flat.” Verbs are few and inert, “occupied,” “stretched,” “lay.” For Kegler the very ordinariness of this picture of another world makes it more alive with the numinous, conveying “to the reader an intensive excitement and a challenge, participating in the narrator’s experiences upon observing the picture” (60). This writer agrees with her: but then he also thinks how many could equally see the image as a picture of the present flatness of the soul of Mr. Vane, who must journey through the deserts of himself to make a new geography. Symbol or metaphor, sacred or secular? It can always go both ways.

Of course, one might have looked for a fuller treatment of MacDonald’s debt to Swedenborg, but this is not Adelheid Kegler’s purpose here. She is trying to show how Swedenborg’s ideas and visions come through Symbolist techniques. So we hear nothing of the idea of correspondences which MacDonald so loved, nor also of his ideas of some created things being special signatures of God, nor of universalism, nor of selfishness being the badge of hell—all of them ideas in Swedenborg—and neither for that matter do we hear of the several ways in which MacDonald differs from this visionary forbear. But what we do have is a focus on the primary concern of symbol-reading which would guarantee Swedenborg’s continuance at the level of immediate experience rather than just influence. And on the whole it is done well, by someone with a mind often clear and penetrating enough to take us far into the subject.